Depiction of Common Man in Arthur Miller's Select Plays: A Critical Perspective

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DEPICTION OF COMMON MAN IN ARTHUR MILLER'S

Select Plays: A Critical Perspective

1] Introduction:

> "A drama is simply an excerpt from life. That is to say, the aim of the true dramatist ought to be the providing on the stage of as faithful a replica as may be of a scene which either has actually occurred or has been conceived in such terms as to make it life like."
>
> (Nicoll, *Theroy of Drama*,25)

Literature has always been a rich source of reflection and exploration of human emotions and sentiments since ages. It has been constantly exploring and analyzing diverse realms of human life like: social, political, linguistic, cultural, religious and spiritual. Apart from its function of entertainment, it earnestly attempts to bring changes in the living conditions of human beings by showing the sordid and ugly conditions of it. A literary work might put you into laughter or can thrust into a sea of tears, it enthuse living spirit among its readers. Its genres have different functions to perform i.e. 'poetry' transgress us to the world of beauty and imagination, 'essays and articles' impart intellectual and academic knowledge while 'novels and drama' unfold the realistic conditions of the contemporary society. Twentieth century American literature particularly drama has been noted for realistic contents, the realism. It has been called 'drama of ideas' as many theories and concepts had to be explains and analyzed during the course of drama enactment. However, with the help of modern psychologist, the modern drama started exploring psychological elements of the characters. This, of course, necessitated changes in the narrative techniques but greatly helped in the development of modern drama. The modern drama was more didactic in nature in treatment of actual life. It unsympathetically exposed false sentiments and presented the sordid realities of American life. The modern playwrights ruthlessly revealed hypocrisy and false beliefs of success and content through their dramas, incorporating a wave of realistic literature in America. The man rather the common man was the centre of focus for these playwrights. These playwrights earnestly highlighted restlessness, dissatisfaction and importantly enough, the confusion regarding the existing life of their characters.

Twentieth century American literature witnessed the movement of 'realism' which was highly realistic and naturalistic in nature. This was the cult even of the present day audience. They also showed their interest in watching realistic contents. 'Reality above all things,' was the demand of common man therefore they rejected literature that was devoid of life and human conditions. The writers of realistic school attempted to show life with all its sordid ugliness through their dramas giving a feel of real and next door story for the audience. The writers like Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, August Wilson, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller have resorted to the movement of realism in literature. They presented stark realities of twentieth century American lives and manners and demanded change in it. Their literary outputs focused the common middle class American man who was entrapped into harsh realities of life and American dream. They touched upon the day today issues of a common man like: law and order issue, problems of marriage, domestic violence, justice inequality, gender, class discrimination and importantly psychological suffering. Philip Roth in his book, *Writing American Fiction*, quotes:

> "The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." (27)

Since ages, the writers have been using the literary genre of 'drama' for the sake of entertainment and enlightenment. It is used to express human feelings and sentiments by exploring upon the essential form of behaviour in all cultures. The twentieth century is marked by the boom in the genre 'drama' by the emergence of some of the artistically talented writers like Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller, Samuel Rogers, Tennessee Williams, and Robert Sherwood.

Arthur Miller a noted playwright, an essayist, novelist and a famous personality in 20th century literature. His plays, particularly, are the output of his close and minute observation of contemporary society. He has been phenomenal in representing the contemporary plight of a common American who was bound by his responsibilities towards his family and the society. He was the product of the Great Depression period which he consciously reflected in his dramas and essays. "He was shaped by the Great Depression which spelled financial ruin for his father, a small manufacturer, and demonstrated the young Miller the insecurities of modern existence." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Miller) He

came into limelight with some of his early plays like *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Sales Man* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953) which not only made the writer famous but won many prizes and awards. Generally, his plays follow a unique pattern in terms of themes and narrative technique. His effort through his plays seems to be to confront and to find some meaning to the world witnessed by him. Nevertheless, he fails sometimes in his honest attempts which lead his work to disillusionment but it is no defeat or relegation into the stature of the writer. He uses the genre of drama as medium of reflecting truths of life and truths of morality. He successfully manages to synchronise the subjective and objective aspects of reality in his plays. Although, he relies on the external sources for the plots of his plays, but eventually they turned out to be some or other parts of his biography. Therefore, we assuredly admit that his plays are essentially a reflection of his own life. He himself endorses this point:

> "I was looking for the world that would be perfect. I think it necessary that i do that if i were to develop myself, as writer..... I am not satisfied of this. I accept my life..... What I sought to find from without I subsequently learned must be created within." (Introduction to Psychology, 60)

Although a great deal of research has been conducted on the plays of Miller, still, Miller, being inexhaustible in the matters of themes, dramaturgy and psycho-analytical interpretation of his characters, there is a greater scope for exploration and analysis of hidden and untouched aspects of writing. The research intends to study and examine a common man from the plays of Miller and analyze socio-economic, cultural and psychological situations they are put into. Simultaneously, it attempts to explore upon the conditions of American society in the contemporary period.

The present research has been systematically divided into six chapters, each co-ordinating and corresponding the other. The first chapter takes preliminary review of the history of the genre drama. Simultaneously, it dives deep into acknowledging the origin and development of American drama. American drama is prominent and novel for setting different avenues for itself in the world literature. The movement realism was initiated on American soil for the first time. Twentieth century drama was realistic and naturalistic in nature. The chapter also casts light on the realistic movement and its prominent proponents in American dramaturgy. Finally, it provides the fuller bio-literary study of the author Arthur Miller. The chapter second 'Review of Literature' provides the lengthy review of literature that has been written on and about the works of Arthur Miller. The works of Miller have been extensively studied and researched upon, therefore, the researcher would attempt to provide

the detail information of important and less important works related to research area. It will also incorporate books and articles that clear the theoretical proposition related to the research. The chapter third 'Depiction of Common in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*,' being the core chapter studies, evaluates and examines the characters of the select plays from the standpoint of a common man. It attempts to analyze the characters on the basis of psychological and social happenings with them. The focus would, of course, be on the protagonists of the plays. The chapter fourth and fifth would follow the same line of interpretation as is used in the chapter third. The sixth chapter would formulate the natural outcomes/ findings that appear in the course of the research.

2] Objectives of Study:

The researcher intends to undertake the following are some of the objectives of the present research-

- The prime aim of the research is to discuss the issues of a common man as depicted in the select plays of Arthur Miller.
- Secondly it mediates on the distinction of a common man into a psychological man and a social man thereby dealing with the issue of identity.
- Concurrently, the study aims to throw light on the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political environs surrounding a common man in the contemporary society.
- An attempt would be made to re-examine and re-analyze the social-structure of the contemporary era within the context of the select plays.
- And lastly the research aims to study and analyze the social process to know how things, customs, values and beliefs come into existence in a sophisticated society.

3] Scope and Limitations:

The research intends to evaluate and analyze the characters on the standpoint of a common man. However, hand in hand, it explores on the existing conditions in the contemporary era which are largely responsible for the tragedy of its characters. In fact, the research is flexible enough to cover all possible dimensions and perspective that will occur in the course of in-depth study and analysis of the select plays. Logically, it would trace the history of American drama and its subsequent development. It also studies common themes and noted contemporary writers in American playwriting. However, the research would be limited to

the select plays of Arthur Miller. Nevertheless, there is greater scope to delve into relevant themes apart from the underlined theme.

4] Review of Literature:

Before taking up the research problem, the researcher has consulted previous research works done in the area. The purpose of review of literature has always been to avoid the repetition of the topic and here with the same perspective the researcher has analyzed the following works and proved that there is a research gap allowing a room and scope for the present study.

1. A post-graduation dissertation entitled, "Arthur Miller: The Individual and the Society," written by Anna Kathryn Thompson, an M. A., Scholar, submitted to College of William & Mary- Arts & Sciences, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1987.

   The research is an attempt to synchronies Miller's fascination with the relationship between the individual and the society. The researcher examines the stated theme in the three select novels of Arthur Miller; *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Crucible*. An attempt is made to show how sometimes an individual betrays the society and how at times the society tests the individual.
2. Ph.D. thesis entitled, "American Dream: illusion and Reality – a Study of Selected Plays of Arthur Miller" by Himadri Sekhar Roy under supervision of Dr. Manoj Bhise submitted to the University of Pune, 2011.

   This research study comprises seven chapters, chapter one 'Modern American Drama', is an introductory chapter to modern American plays and its nature. Chapter two 'Arthur Miller: The Man and The Artist', is informative introductory chapter about the author and his writing style. Chapter three '*All My Sons'*, chapter four '*Death of a Salesman*', chapter five '*A View from the Bridge*', chapter six '*After the Fall*', consecutively dealt with the prime theme of research i.e. illusion and reality depicted by author himself. Chapter seven is concluding chapter of the present study.
3. Ph.D. thesis entitled, "Feminism in Arthur Miller's Select Plays; A Critical Perspective" , by Meena S. Makodiya under the supervision of Dr. Vipul V. Makodia submitted to Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, 2015.

The dissertation is divided into five main chapters followed by a concluding one. Chapter one 'The Making of the Dramatist' explores writers in depth development as a dramatist in nature. Chapter two 'The Male Protagonist and Their Wives' deal with the treatment given to various types of characters in context to their genders. Chapter three 'Patriarchy and Family Relationship' is a copious informative chapter about the rules and customs of contemporary society. Chapter four 'Female Identity', in this chapter researcher has tried the problems of female characters and their struggle for own identity. Chapter five 'The Concept of Other Women' is discussed and explained through the light of select plays written of author and tried to give justice for women. The final chapter, chapter six is is concluding chapter of the present research study.

4. An article entitled "The Idea of Tragedy in Arthur Miller' *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*," by Hanyue Li, published in the journal English Language and Literature Studies, Vol8, No. 2, Shanghai, China, 2018.

   The paper examines both the ostensible structures of standardized Greek tragedy and the hidden ideas of modern tragedy and their brilliant application in the two select plays by Miller. It also distinguishes the modern tragedy from the traditional.

5. An article Tragedy and Social Drama in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, written by Tahar Bayouli and Imed Sammali, the research students, Majmaah Unicersity, Saudi Arabia, and published in an international journal Arab World English Journal in 2019.

   The research is an attempt of the classification of genre in *Death of Salesman* on the dialectic relation of the play's structure between tragedy and social drama. It sums up that the tragedy of an individual is closely associated with social issues prevalent in the society at that time.

6. A Master's Report entitled, "Arthur Miller: Theory and Practice," written by Karen Kickelberg and submitted to Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas in 1966.

   The research is a brilliant endeavor to evaluate the theory tragedy and tragic fallacy in the practice of life of a common. Here in this researcher casts light on common man, but it is in connection with tragedy. The researcher studies tragedy or tragic happenings with a common man.

7. "A Study from a New Historicist Approach of Arthur Miller' *Death of a Salesman*," is a Master's report submitted by Hisham Thany Rahman to the Middle East University , Amman, Jordan in 2016.

   The research probes into Miller' greatest tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, using the new historicist approach as a methodology of evaluation of the play. The researcher attempts to align the outside context regarding the biographical, historical, political, social and cultural contexts with the special reference to the characters, themes and events of the play.

5] Research Gap:

Although Arthur Miller has been extensively worked upon, the works of such a literary giant leaves scope and gaps for every new researcher. His plays, unlike the plays of Vijay Tendulkar in India, are written and set on humanitarian background, being a common man as the centre of the action; therefore they are the moral guides for people to learn from them. The social and psychological interpretation of the characters would enlighten readers and researchers to understand the wrong, illegal and unjust and bring change in themselves and the society. Therefore, there is a greater need for the evaluation and analysis of the issues common man so as to benefit the society to abstain itself from committing any wring deeds. The research works on humanity and human problems would always be welcomed in the society.

6] Research Problems:

1. What are the issues of a common man in Western society?

2. Are the issues of a Western man are pertinent to all societies and cultures in the world?

3. What are the factors that are responsible for the suffering of a common man?

4. Is solutions are provided for the issues of a common man in the select plays of Miller?

5. Is the social and psychological interpretation of the characters helps readers understand the problem in a better way?

7] Hypothesis:

The researcher hypothesizes Arthur Miller as a realist writer whose oeuvre is the outcome of minute observation and complete care and diligence. His plays are reflexive of contemporary society with a man as the protagonist. Simultaneously, they unfold social and psychological happenings with the characters. Miller is an iconoclast writer, who by criticising wrong and unjust American mores, beliefs and way of life, attempts to bring change in the contemporary society. His protagonists are in constant struggle to live up to the standards of the society by proving to realize the American dream.

8] Data Collection:

The research is a critical investigation into the evaluation of Arthur Miller's characters in the select plays. However, it relies completely on the availability of the Primary and Secondary data resources. The primary sources would be the select plays of Arthur Miller for the present study and secondary sources would be comprised of research articles, news paper columns, books, and dissertations written and published on and about the works of Arthur Miller. The researcher intends to visit various libraries available in India and would rely on the on-line content available on the present study.

9] Research Methodology:

The present research would utilize analytical and descriptive research methodology so as to access into the personality of the characters of the select plays and contribute to evaluation of psycho-social and physical realities they are in. Further, it would be descriptive while delineating and formulating its textual entity in the form of thesis. Extensive reading and analysis of primary and secondary sources would be required for the investigation of the selected perspectives. Finally, it would establish, verify and validate its hypothetical assumptions by formulating a concrete conclusion to the theme undertaken. The researcher would use library methodology as per the availability of information on the topic. At the same time the research will follow MLA 8th edition for its referencing, quotations and bibliography.

10] Significance of the Research:

Although, a good deal of research is done on the works of Arthur Miller, still his literary world seems to be unfathomable for many, for the budding researchers relentlessly continue to explore and trace the untouched and neglected part of his works. The present

research would be an example for the in-depth study of his characters from the select plays from the standpoint of a common man. Therefore, it will help the researchers, students and academicians to understand Arthur Miller from different point of view. Academically, the research would engage and bring greater benefits to the concerned in the field.

11] Tentative Chapter Scheme:

The research is systematically divided and classified into six chapters to make it convenient for the understanding of the entire outline of the study. The first chapter would relate the background of the research foregrounding the evolution and development of American drama. The subsequent chapters would undertake careful analysis of the select plays followed by formative conclusion.

Chapter I: **Introduction**

The chapter first 'introduction,' sets the platform for the present research. The segment provides in-depth information to the rise and development of the genre, 'drama.' At the same time it records the journey of this genre in America. Although, American drama was quite dull and unimpressive in every possible way in nineteenth century, it attracted the attention of the world in twentieth century with its manoeuvre of the realistic and naturalistic content; realistic in terms of themes and naturalistic in terms of narratology. The chapter investigates into the origin of the genre and the changes occur in it in the course of time. American drama that bewitched the world audience and the readership would be assessed and accessed in detail in this chapter. Simultaneously, it contemplates the American dream that was envisaged by the majority of young American population. Similarly, it studies the contemporary dramatist and their notable works. The last segment of the chapter would be devoted to bio-literary sketch of Arthur Miller highlighting his major works and common themes discussed through his plays.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

As stated earlier, the present research undertakes to study and evaluate the select works of Arthur Miller from the stand point of a common man. The select plays for this research are; *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, *After the Fall* and *The Price*. Review of literature with the concerned topic shows that there have been very less

efforts to examine the plays of Arthur Miller on the point of a common man being the protagonist or an average character in the play. Apart from the analysis of the characters from the standpoint of a common man, the plays of Miller touches upon varied social, economical and cultural issues of the contemporary period. An attempt would be made to evaluate all related material that is available on the stated problem. There is inexhaustible secondary material available in the form of articles, essays and books on the works of Arthur Miller. The researcher would try his best to consider all important and unimportant databases for the purpose of the present study.

Chapter III: Depiction of Common Man in *All my Sons* and *A Death of a Salesman*

All My Sons revolves around the psychological battle of its protagonist, Joe Keller, who is trapped into the feeling of guilt and responsibility. He is a manufacturer of war material who provides substandard and defective airplane parts which causes the death of his own son and twenty one other soldiers. Keller proves himself as a good husband and good father but fails as a good citizen. The play narrates the psychological dual that is constantly going on in his mind. At the end of the play Joe realises his mistake and understands the difference between morality and business ethics.

. *Death of a Salesman* on the contrary shows its protagonist Willy Loman to be failure in not carrying out his familial responsibilities. After many years of travelling on road as a salesman, Willy realizes that he carried out his job responsibilities properly but not the familial. His sons Happy and Biff quarrel with him and make fun of his belief"smile and shoeshine.' In an attempt of realizing the American Dream very much like Joe Keller, Willy falls prey to social criticism causing his pathetic death. Unlike, Joe, he too accepts the myth of American Dream that infatuates young people and put them into the dire of anguish and pain.

Chapter IV: **Depiction of Common Man in *The Crucible* and *A View From the Bridge***

The Crucible is the political allegory that dramatizes the struggle of an individual against the contemporary political force. John Proctor, the protagonist in the play, refutes to accept social and political obligations put by the society and political parties. He has been murdered by the society for his unacceptance of societal beliefs and ideas. However, his death becomes a phenomenon in the contemporary society as a triumph of an affirmation of an individual against the society.

A View from the Bridge dramatizes the psychological trauma of its protagonist, Eddie Carbone, who is unable to accept his fault of deceiving the Italian relatives of his wife. It is

taken that it is Eddie who informed the immigration department about the illegal entry of his Italian relatives into US. The drama centres around this act of Eddie and his unacceptance of it.

Chapter V: Depiction of Common Man in *After the Fall* and *The Price*

After the Fall dramatizes the personal fall of Miller in the form of divorce with Manrilyn Monroe. The play centres on the protagonist's (Quentin) divided soul regarding his marriage with his recent love, Holga. The play is semi-autobiographical narrating same events that had happened in the life of the author. The suicide of Maggie, the former wife of Quentin and the subsequent longing and feeling of great loss on the part of the protagonist is reminiscent to the accidental overdose death of Miller's wife and the aftermath miserable condition of the author. The feelings of Quentin are often believed to be the feelings of the author. The play remained unpopular with the audience of the time and after, but it was highly praised by the critics for its academic and intellectual aspects. At the same time, the play remains one of the finest pieces of psychological unravelling of its protagonist's mind. The play can best be sum up in the words of Frank: "Quentin is a witness to alarming public and personal catastrophe, the stock market crash, the Holocaust, the McCarthy witchhunts and the self-destruction of a show business idol to whom he is married."(Theatre: After the Fall is Revived, 22)

The Price is a family drama unlike most other plays of Arthur Miller. The play recounts the quarrel broke between the two bereft brothers: Walter (a surgeon) and Victor (a police officer). The quarrel is about selling of the furniture of their late father to Solomon, a second-hand furniture vendor. The two brothers are the two poles apart in nature and social understanding. Walter and his wife Esther believe that the late father has hidden money from the family and Victor due to his familial issues like divorce and economical crunches is mentally unstable. The play interestingly narrates an unprecedented situation of the vendor who is caught into a tug of war that is going on in the family. Finally, Walter shows better understanding by offering a job of hospital assistant to Victor reconciling the fact that he is his own brother. Thus, the play ends on a positive note and the reunion of the family members.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The conclusive segment would undertake an appropriate evaluation of Arthur Miller's observation of a common man that he represented through his dramas. It touches upon the comparative and critical analysis of the characters, specially the protagonists, of the select plays. Though the focus would be on the analysis of the characters from the standpoint of a common man, still the research plans to cover up several contemporary issues that appeared in the course of the evaluation of the select plays of Arthur Miller. The research would underline the essential and critical issues for a common man of twentieth century. 'American dream' was disillusionment and misbelieve that most of the American lived up to prove that they have realized this dream. In fact, the dream was illusory and deceptive for a common man to comply with the existing conditions. Twentieth century American society is characterized by a common man who is indulged in day-today issues of life, he is caught in to a situation where solutions are less and problems are more. Miller realistically presents an authentic view of the contemporary society.

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